

# EXPLORATIONS



Phone: 410-366-1851  
Fax: 410-243-7062  
www.listeninghearts.org  
<http://blog.listeninghearts.org>



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## Focus and Fluidity

**Suzanne Farnham**  
**Founder**

Spiritual discernment can benefit from a simple format that sets boundaries and helps maintain focus while providing the fluidity that allows interior movement. It is best to set aside time—a few hours, or a day, or a cluster of days—to follow the format. Alternatively, you can progress through the steps below one by one, putting aside a shorter amount of time daily over an extended period. Either way, the sequence of actions remains the same.

1. Identify an issue you are wrestling with. Write it down as a concise question addressed to God. No multiple choice or yes/no questions, which would limit God’s response to something that you are already thinking.
2. Take time to let the question take root in you.
3. Assemble relevant information. Identify options, weigh them, listing their pros and cons, and perhaps arrive at a preliminary position.
4. Try to broaden your perspective through a creative meditation activity. At the website for Listening Hearts Ministries, a section called Heartlinks provides a library of meditation exercises.
5. Next, offer the entire matter to God. Become still, letting everything come to rest. Try to think nothing and feel nothing, allowing all that you have been thinking and feeling to simply hover at the periphery. Try to be internally still for at least ten minutes; better yet, twenty minutes, possibly much longer. Try to keep your consciousness focused at the center of your being. When thoughts or feelings arise, let them come and then let them go. For some people this works best while sitting upright in a straight chair or in a lotus position on the floor. For others it works best while moving—walking, running, swimming slowly, riding an exercise bike, knitting, or some other or soothing or mind-freeing activity.
6. As insights develop, look for signs of the Spirit, such as threads coming together, the same message coming to you in different ways at different times, surges of joy or energy.

The only sign that is essential is a sense of deep peace rising from beneath the turbulence, with agitation receding. Rarely do all of these signs occur, but if their opposites are present, that is a sign that the discernment process needs to continue.

Such structured efforts at spiritual discernment jump-start the process, but discerning one's path is an ever-evolving process that is never complete. It can, however, get easier with practice. Act on your best understanding of the next step God would have you take. Continue to listen from your center, and the divine Spirit will guide you, revealing missteps and pointing the way to your true path. The refrain of a gospel hymn written by Doris Akers puts it this way:

Lead me, guide me, along the way.  
For if you lead me, I cannot stray.  
Lord, let me walk each day with Thee.  
Lead me, oh Lord, lead me.

## Space for the Holy

**Susan Dean  
Mercer Island, WA**

At a clergy retreat here in Seattle, our facilitator, Suzanne Farnham, said we would be using art supplies in some creative meditation exercises. My first response was to groan. I felt the familiar tightening in my stomach: Oh no, produce art on command! I've learned, however, that if I relax and let go, something of value often comes from those crafty exercises.

As it happened, this experience was about letting go. Suzanne expanded on the traditional wisdom about detachment, easing us into the idea of holding lightly, not clinging, but not necessarily having to give something up. Then she sent us off with Wikki Stix, short pieces of colorful yarn with heavy wax coating that look somewhat like pipe cleaners.

On a rare afternoon of Seattle spring sunshine, I sat outside on a rock, tilted my face toward the warmth, and let my hands play. First I let go of thoughts—well, most of them. That's the only way that creating art works for me. Don't overthink. Don't cling to thoughts. Don't figure it out in advance and force the art to conform.



I found myself connecting the Stix, one by one twisting them to form bonds. I'd pause, chuckle, wonder what on earth I was making, wonder whether anything of value would be revealed. I just kept going until all the Stix were used.

Then I looked. What I saw was a structure of beautiful colors, all the parts connected except one. That one remains a puzzle. It's the only one not intertwined; instead, it forms a ring around another Stix. Not separate, the yellow ring both supports and is supported by the structure. I can hold up the entire

sculpture just with that one ring. Then I pushed the structure and discovered that it's flexible. It bends and moves. It morphs. As it shifts, I can see how the different colored parts are interrelated.

So here's what was revealed to me. If I do not cling, whatever I have been holding too tightly will have freedom to transform, and I may have an opportunity to see it in a new light. I continue wonder about the small yellow ring, the one less connected than the others. Can it represent my ministry? Underhill House has been a vision waiting fifteen years to open its doors. It's a quiet place to pause for prayer in downtown Seattle. It's not a parish, but rather a place devoted to silent prayer, open to people from all walks of life. "Listeners" greet the guests and pray with them, if desired. Although not formally connected to a specific congregation, the ministry is faithfully supported by the Episcopal Church. Underhill House lives on the edge of the Church and yet is at the heart of the Church; filled with quiet prayer, it is a place for silence, to be still and hear the voice of the Holy.

Amazing how an unanticipated experience can bring new life to old wisdom. Structure, if flexible, creates space, space for the Holy. Like liturgy, or venetian blinds, the light comes in through the oh-so-structured framework.

*The Rev. Susan Dean is the executive director of Underhill House. She is grateful for gifts in spiritual direction, discernment, healing ministry, and prayer. For relaxation she enjoys art, architecture, jazz, cooking, and being with family and friends. Visit the website for Underhill House at [www.underhillhouse.org](http://www.underhillhouse.org).*

## **How to Cultivate Healthy Relationships With Your Independent Adult Children**

Developing mature wholesome relationships with adult children who do not live at home with you can be exhilarating and deeply satisfying. Yet almost always it is challenging because it requires letting go of a desire to control the continuing development of one's children. Values and lifestyles change significantly from one generation to the next. In addition, if the children are married, they have a whole new extended family to accommodate.

For a parent to accept all of this demands detachment. It requires giving up the relationship as it was when the child was young. The following guidelines may be helpful:

1. Remember that your child is a grown-up. Communicate as adult to adult.
2. Listen intently and with respect. Listen with your eyes as well as your ears.
3. Do not interrupt—even if what is being said hurts your feelings, is contrary to your values, or pushes your emotional buttons.
4. If you sense strong feelings emerging within you, step back to allow time and space for them to settle down. It is important to express your feelings fully and honestly, but wait until you can do so without rancor, in a way that is calm and caring.
5. Take pains to be neither accusatory nor patronizing. Avoid evoking guilt or shame.
6. It is important that you articulate your own needs and desires. Try to do so in a way that is clear, yet does not come across as a demand.
7. Stay focused on whatever topic is under discussion. Do not throw in other problems and complaints.
8. Avoid generalizations that use words such as "always" or "never."
9. Refrain from giving advice unless it has been explicitly requested.
10. Ask questions that reflect interest in things that are important to your children. If you sense that one of your children needs attention, pose questions to help draw him or her out. Do not ask questions that pry into their lives or invade their privacy.
11. Try to be sensitive to desires or pressures on them that may take them away from you on holidays, other special occasions, or at vacation time.

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#### MISSION STATEMENT

Listening Hearts Ministries provides a range of programs, publications, and services that teach people the practice of spiritual discernment through prayerful listening in supportive communities.

*As we listen to God in prayer and through one another, we grow in Christian community and in our sense of God's path for us.*

—Listening Hearts, p.61

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12. When recollecting incidents from the past, memories of the same situation can be diametrically opposed. Avoid arguing about whose memory is correct. Try to respect whatever differences exist. Articulate your own feelings as dispassionately as possible. Leave space for your child to explore his or her own thoughts and feelings to whatever extent he or she chooses.

Always try to listen with compassion from the center of your being. To the extent that you can be a caring non-anxious presence, you will be a channel for maturing and wholeness.

*This article was originally published as part of our series, Do-It-Yourself Discernment, an online collection of Practical Outlines for All Occasions. Every six weeks a new title is added on the Listening Hearts website. Topics range from dealing with a job loss to discussing troubling matters with teens. A group of five people works collaboratively to develop each piece. Find more at: [blog.listeninghearts.org/practical](http://blog.listeninghearts.org/practical).*